

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER



Fourth Sunday of Eastertide 2023, Good Shepherd Sunday

**APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS
IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 29th April 2023**

My dear people,

Each year, on the fourth Sunday of Eastertide, we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. As I write this Pastoral Letter, I am keeping in mind in a particular way all the priests of the Diocese, thanking God for each of them, in their magnificent diversity! I think of those in active ministry, those retired, some of whom live far from the Diocese, those who celebrate significant jubilees this year and those working away from the Diocese.

The image of Christ the Good Shepherd is given to us as the model of all Pastoral Ministry, and is especially the model for the priest, called to guard and tend the Lord's flock. Our sophisticated lives can mean we are less conscious of the realities Christ brings us in this image, but we can try. Let us pay careful attention to His words, words we have heard often, and yet words that still have so much to teach us at this moment in our lives. As we listen, I ask you to pray for your priests, pray for our seminarians, and pray for vocations to the Priesthood and the Religious Life. We find ourselves fewer now than in recent years, but what is asked of us is exactly the same as what was asked of us and others in years gone by, to model our lives on the life of Christ, and follow Him.

Jesus' whole Mission is expressed in striking simplicity at the very end of today's Gospel, ***'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'*** This is the work of Jesus, so it must become our work too. No change of fortune or circumstances in our individual lives or the life of the global community changes this; it remains what we are called to do because it is the desire of the Father.

When Jesus first called St. Peter, He said that he would become a fisher of men. Fishing was what St. Peter knew. But later came the call for him to leave his nets and boat and become a shepherd. ***'Feed my lambs, look after my sheep,'*** he is instructed. He is like someone being called from a job or a career they know well to a vocation. He was called to something entirely new.

And even today, Our Lord can break in on our ordered, clearly planned-out lives, and bring what seems to be to us 'something gone wrong', 'something unwelcome', 'something disturbing', 'something that won't go away or leave me alone'. Of course, we can try to resist, thinking of so many reasons why it should be someone else and not me, but it is better for us not to argue for too long with God. There will be only one winner in that contest. . . .

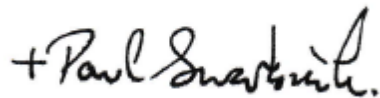
In many less well-developed parts of the world, especially in times of drought, terrible tensions grow up between farmers and pastoralists. The farmers work hard to grow their crops, but the pastoralists, the shepherds, are determined to find grazing for their animals. In many settings, the pastoralists have a very bad reputation, and often it is well deserved. There is competition

between the shepherds for scarce resources. Violence is often a way of life as old scores need to be settled, and unending feuds are passed from one generation to the next.

By giving Himself the title of, Good Shepherd, it is as though Our Lord is showing us another way to live together, and to see good in a class of people we have lost all respect for. The hills were full of bad shepherds, but here is one who is different.

We remember the Christmas story of the shepherds hearing the angels and being guided to the crib in Bethlehem. Surely Mary told stories about the shepherds to her young Son as He grew, opening His eyes to see good in them. Her kind stories bore fruit all those years later as Jesus took up this theme of the Good Shepherd. May these stories continue to bear fruit even in our own times, as Mary opens our eyes to see the good in others that God never lost sight of. And may we join in the work of Christ, through prayer, Mass and works of kindness, gathering the scattered flock into the safety of the Lord's fold.

With my blessing upon you and your families,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul Swarbrick." The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+Paul Swarbrick.

Bishop of Lancaster